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SUBJECT: CHIKUNGUNYA EPIDEMIC ON REUNION ISLAND -
HEALTH MINISTER UNDER FIRE

REF: Paris 1103

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NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (U) Summary: A chikungunya ('chik') mosquito-borne viral epidemic in the French Indian Ocean island of Reunion has become a serious political problem in Paris. Health Minister Bertrand in particular has been roundly criticized for "under-estimating" the epidemic. In an attempt to rein in the crisis, Prime Minister de Villepin will head for the French overseas department on February 26, where he is expected to announce new measures and significant financial help. The Health and Research Ministries have established a task force to define and coordinate chik research programs. French medical authorities also requested U.S. military medical research assistance. Assistance by U.S. authorities to aid the French in combating the chik epidemic is much appreciated. End summary.

New Facts, Soaring Figures

¶2. (U) According to the Health Ministry's latest figures (released February 23), over 130,000 people (out of a population of some 800,000) have contracted the chik virus in Reunion since the start of the outbreak in March 2005. More than 100,000 chik cases have been recorded since the beginning of 2006 and the toll of new infections was running at 22,000 cases for the third week of February alone. The viral infection, which hits 15 percent of the population (25 percent according to some local reports), is usually characterized by muscular pain and joint swellings, fever and rash and lasts three to seven days.

¶3. (U) French authorities and medical staff in Reunion recently expressed their concern at the evolution of the infection and symptoms, emphasizing notably new transmission from mother to child, neurological manifestations of the disease (meningitis), and frequent relapses among patients after a two-week period of remission. Above all, French authorities acknowledge that the virus, initially described as "not life-threatening," may be "directly or indirectly" responsible for the deaths of 77 people, including children.

Worrisome, Contentious Issue

¶4. (U) Subject to major disruption of everyday activities, and confronted with increasing cancellations by French tour operators (tourism is an major source of income in Reunion), the islanders contrast the strong response underway by the GOF to the avian influenza and the relatively scant - they claim -- attention paid by "continental France" to the chik issue. A Socialist Deputy generated turmoil in the National Assembly on February 21, claiming that the GOF was "paying more attention to geese (a reference to the Avian Influenza threat) than to Reunionese." Note: The GOF has spent approximately 750,000 USD so far in their response to the chik outbreaks. Prime Minister de Villepin is expected to announce more financial commitments during his visit. End note.

Epidemic of Ministers

¶5. (U) Chikungunya has been widely covered by the French press with more and more provocative headlines such as "The Government's Strange Torpor." or "The Price of Inaction" (Liberation, February 24). One report in the daily Le Monde mentioned that a persistent rumor circulating on Reunion is that somehow the epidemic is associated with the actions of a U.S. military unit that recently visited the island. (Note: A USAF telemetry unit did visit there for the launch of a NASA satellite, but of course had nothing to do with the disease. End note.) Health Minister Bertrand, notably, has received the lion's share of the parliamentary and media criticism over the management of the epidemic. Reportedly "irritated" by his Health Minister, the Prime Minister has decided to take the lead on the issue: after the Health, Tourism and Overseas Territories Ministers, the PM will be the fourth minister to visit Reunion within a matter of a

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couple weeks.

Increased Means

¶6. (U) The GOF has announced the provision of extra troops to eradicate the mosquito population. In addition, 3600 insecticide sprayers will be available to spray the entire island of Reunion by February 27. The Health Minister also announced the shipment of extra medical equipment and the reinforcement of medical care. Other measures include the free distribution of mosquito repellent and mosquito-nets treated with insecticide to categories of the population (pregnant women, young children, and the elderly).

¶7. (U) Meanwhile, the French government has established a task force to coordinate research on the chik disease in public research agencies and university hospitals. This new entity will be supervised by Professor Antoine Flahaut, Head of the Public Health Department at the hospital Tenon in Paris, also responsible for the "Sentinelles" network (France's flu surveillance network). The new structure has already been tasked to establish and coordinate a comprehensive research program around the following themes: characterization of the virus; control of insects acting as vectors; study of the environmental impact of insecticides used in Reunion; exploitation of epidemiological data; and elaboration of new therapeutic approaches. One million euros has also been earmarked for clinical research, including serological analysis of a thousand pregnant women.

U.S. Assistance

¶8. (U) During the visit to Paris of Deputy Secretary of HHS Azar in January, Health Minister Bertrand sought whatever U.S. assistance might be possible to address the chik epidemic. Embassy understands that HHS and U.S. military

health authorities (USAMRIID) are engaged in discussions on transfer of research that has been conducted into the disease. The Embassy very much supports this work and seeks - at the earliest appropriate occasion - to assist in the dissemination of a press release regarding this cooperation.

HOFMANN